

*Exploring Football as a Site
for Discursive Construction
and Disciplinary Power in
Colonial India*

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The emergence of the body as an important analytical tool in recent years in studies of South Asian history and culture has had two main sources. On the one hand there is Edward Said who emphasized the place of cultural constructions of the body in the dissemination of the ideology of Western superiority and non-Western inferiority that was key to legitimizing the colonialism of Europe. Indeed, representing these bodies as somehow different and corrupted was the first step towards justifying the control over such bodies. The control of the

physical manifestation of the 'other' was justified and naturalized by representing them as somehow 'different' and inferior to the 'norm' — the 'normal' body of the West. Foucault, of course is the other source/influence. He argued that the body became central to the operations of the modern state from the end of the eighteenth century onwards. Modern systems of production and government control demanded that individuals be able to submit their bodies to regular and repeated work organized around timetables, deadlines etc. Watching, analyzing, regulating, recording the functioning body of the individual therefore became of the highest importance to modern states. As a result a range of institutions and technologies was devised to ensure large populations of strong and regulated bodies ready for work and for duty. Foucault implicates such phenomena as modern medicine, the factory system, modern prisons and penal techniques and psychiatry in this web of disciplinary techniques.

Introduction

So, the body as a discursive site and as a subject of disciplinary power were the two sources of the recent focus on the body in South Asian Studies. The range of studies that focusses on the body in South Asia include medicine in India, psychiatry in India, prisons and convict system in the region, constructions of masculinity and femininity in South Asia, and in representations of race,

caste and communal identity there. All of these studies originate in the works of Said and Foucault. For the purpose of this paper, the discussion will be limited to the area of sports — rather, the importance of the body in the experience of sport in the region and into the centrality of sport in conceptions of the Indian body.

In order to understand the development of sports in India it is necessary to understand the way in which these activities relate and intertwine with existing concepts of the body in the cultures of the country. Equally important is to examine how the corporal experience of sports and other physical activities often extend to other social and cultural experiences and identities. What follows is an approach to the early history of football in India by using the body as an analytical tool. It will demonstrate that football there acted as a means for imagining and transforming the Indian body. But perhaps more importantly, it will show that the game also became implicated in Indian attempts to resist these colonial corporal politics.

The British used the sports to focus on the Indian body in order to transform it into types considered more suitable or desirable by the colonizers. But, Indian bodies were also sites for resisting these intentions, and indeed for mediating and negotiating them. An analysis of corporal politics is needed to comprehend why Indians took on European sports.

Football and Corporal Politics in Colonial India

The body is central to understanding the introduction of football into colonial India by the British and its subsequent spread and development. But an analysis of football texts is also important for the wider project of understanding the broader colonial designs for Indian bodies. Such an analysis can yield any of the following three conclusions. First of all, football was one of the means through which the British sought to control and transform Indian bodies into units suitable for colonial projects. Secondly, the imagery of the game was an idiom in which the British attempted to construct discourses about Indian bodies that implicated them in the ideologies of colonial rule. And finally, the footballer's body was one of the sites where Indians contested these colonial discourses about their physiques.

Football was often used as a means to exclude Indians from European circles. It was also used to emphasize the social and physical distance between the two communities that was considered desirable by the British. But there were many among the colonial establishment that wished to encourage football among certain Indian groups. The reasons for the desire of many British to have Indians play the game lies in a range of discourses about 'race' and about 'orientalism' that coloured the British thinking about India after the uprising of 1857.

The British tried to classify and categorize Indians on the basis of perceived 'racial' qualities. A healthy race was postulated to be characterized by bodily vigour and strength, so that it was capable of defending itself through warfare but also capable of self-sacrifice for weaker allies. Accordingly, the strong and independent nation was constructed as one that had the 'male' qualities of physical power and prowess, while the colonized were portrayed as weak and effeminate and in need of the benevolent protection of a 'male' civilization.

Bengalis were represented by the British as an example of such a weak and effeminate people, and they were dismissed by the colonizers as possessing 'the intellect of a Greek and the grit of a rabbit' (Rosselli 1980, 121). The image of the effeminate *babu* became a dominant feature of colonial life and a general slur upon all Bengalis. *Babu* was a term of derision specifically relating to the English-educated Bengali middle-class male who was employed in the service of the empire as an administrative or professional worker. The *babu* was widely reviled as physically weak and morally suspect for collaborating with British interests.

All of this points to the wider cultural and social changes within which football emerged and that made football politically meaningful. The 1857 mutiny originated among Bengali officers. Thereafter soldiers from the region were looked upon as unreliable. As a result, recruit-

ment policy after 1857 deliberately excluded Bengalis, choosing to focus instead on recruiting soldiers from parts of India that had chosen to remain loyal to the British in 1857. The association of these races with the military service and of Bengalis with treachery (and exclusion from the army) led to a construction of a series of images classifying supposedly 'martial' and 'non-martial' races of India. Punjabis and the Gurkhas, the martial races were constructed/ represented as essentially 'different' from the effeminate 'Bengalis'. As Stanley Wolpert argues:

The British soon [after the Mutiny] developed their spurious theories about 'martial races' and 'non-martial races, based for the most part upon their experience with 'loyal' and 'disloyal' troops during the mutiny. (Wolpert 1997, 241-242)

In fact, fitness for football in particular and sports in general were important tools through which these representations of 'different' Indian bodies were constructed. One observer, for example, decided that "by his legs you shall know the Bengali. The leg of a free man is straight or a little bandy, so that he can stand on it solidly [...] The Bengali's leg is either skin and bones; the same size all the way down, with knocking knobs for knees, or else it is very fat and globular, also turning in at the knees, with round thighs like a woman's. The Bengali's leg is the leg of a slave". (Chowdhury-Sengupta 1995, 298) This

can be contrasted with one officer's assessment and suitability regarding recruitment in the army. Regarding the Gurkhas he feels: "physique, compact and sturdy build, powerful muscular development, keen sight, acute hearing, and hereditary education as a sportsman, eminently capacitate him for the duties of a light infantry soldier" (Vansittart 1915, 60). The honing of the body through sporting activities was a factor that recommended the Nepali for service in the imperial armies in the eyes of a British soldier.

Football itself was used as a means to construct distinctions between the various martial races. An article in *Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News* (September 1909) described regimental football as follows:

Practically all the men from the various Panjab regiments in Burma who play in these tournaments are of two classes, Sikhs and Panjabi Musulmans and of these two the numbers are about equal, with perhaps a slight preponderance of Musalmans, who are more of a football build than the long and snaky Sikh... The Gurkhas approach more nearly to the proper type of footballers, and are powerful, sturdy, not too big, and strong on their feet, but they are decidedly slow at running, which defect neutralizes their other great advantages. (Bale and Cronin 2003, 116)

The body, as constructed in the imagery of football, was the British construction of different Indian body types.

These constructions had a profound effect on Bengal. Sir George Campbell, Lieutenant –Governor of Bengal in the 1870's believed that "if the educated Bengalees, instead of giving way to intellectual vanity, set themselves to rival European qualities depending on physical and moral tone, they are capable of very great things" (Campbell 1893, 267). As a consequence of such views, the following stipulations were made for the Bengalis who applied for posts in the Native Civil Service:

By every candidate a certificate of character must be produced, as also a medical certificate of fitness for employment in any portion of Bengal. Candidates for appointment of over Rs.100 a month must show that they can ride at least 12 miles at rapid pace; candidates for inferior posts must have similar qualification or be able to walk 12 miles within 3 ½ hours without difficulty or prostration. Good character, health and physical energy [are] thus secured (Campbell 1893, 267).

The British transmitted to the Bengali elites the idea that they were considered physically inferior through such statements and mechanisms. . However, in sports the British offered Indians a means of developing themselves physically. Indeed, many among the British saw it as part of their imperial duty to help Indians to 'improve' themselves and deliberately set about encouraging Bengali men to engage in games. Many Indians and

subsequently Bengalis learnt the lesson that an ability to demonstrate to the British that Bengalis did possess physical vigour was necessary both to get ahead in colonial India and to gain respect of the imperial power. Many Bengalis realized the value and importance of taking advantage of the opportunities to play the colonizers' games. One of the most obvious places where British 'improvement' met with ambitious young Indians was in the Anglo-Indian schools and colleges.

Sport was central to the curriculum in the British-run Anglo-Indian colleges modeled on the British public schools of the nineteenth century. Many middle class Bengalis were educated in such colleges. Sir George Campbell for example emphasized the importance of sport in the syllabus of the College of Engineering in Calcutta:

I spared nothing to make that college complete, but the Bengalis seemed infinitely to prefer literature, law, and politics to anything that required some physical as well as mental exertion. At the same time I am bound to say that when I introduced gymnastics, riding, and physical training in the colleges, they heartily accepted these things, and seemed quite ready to emulate Europeans in that respect. (Campbell 1893, 273-274)

Campbell's implication that Bengalis embraced these benefits indicates his belief in both the superiority of

British ways and in his strategy for Bengali 'improvement'. Although Campbell makes no mention of football per se, another Briton resident of Calcutta in 1885 spotted its importance:

Many educated Natives, in Bengal specially, have for years past felt the reproach which attaches to their want of courage and corporal activity and have earnestly set themselves to remedy these defects: hence on all sides find efforts to follow the examples of Europeans among native students. Football and cricket are becoming popular, and gymnasia introduced. (Bale and Cronin 2003, 117)

Sir Charles Elliott's (Lieutenant- Governor of Bengal in 1891) proposed measures to assist in the 'improvement' of the Bengali 'race' through physical culture is another example of similar colonial attitudes towards sports:

In 1891-92 it was particularly noticed on every hand that there was a great interest in the zeal with which the national English games, especially football were played. On tour Sir C. Elliott constantly watched the performance of the boys with great interest... He looked forward to great improvement in the physique of the Bengalis in the course of one or two generations from this source. (Buckland 1976, 117-118)

Football was considered a source of improvement necessary for the bodies of the Bengali 'race'. The game

was also important in the Army, for ensuring the endurance of 'martial' bodies for war. One officer serving with a Punjabi regiment in Burma noticed that "there is always some sort of game going on every afternoon, and everybody gets an opportunity of playing." (Bale and Cronin 2003, 117) He goes on to explain that "the great thing about football is that it gets the men and ourselves out, and gives us good exercise and something to take an interest in", (Bale and Cronin 2003, 118) emphasizing that the games "were not serious efforts, but merely means of improving the physique, general activity, and resourcefulness of the boys". (Bale and Cronin 2003, 118)

The Indian soldier's body in football was however also used by the British to construct discourses about the need for the control of a 'civilized' nation over India. Michael Anton Budd has spoken of the denigration of the physically robust and militarily indispensable Irish as both 'savage' and weak by virtue of a "lack of self-control". (Budd 1997, 92). Indiscipline (an 'inherent' but invisible weakness) is one of the templates engraved in the discourse regarding the body of the colonized whose physique was desirable. This denigration is then used to justify or rationalize the course of 'improvement'. One officer had this to say about his footballing soldiers: "the recruit, when he first emerged from his jungle or village, has rather less control of his legs than a new-born camel." (Bale and Cronin 2003, 118). Another such officer

gives the following account of the Indian soldiers' use of their own bodies when allowed free rein:

I tried to introduce football. It amused the players highly, but no great skill at the game resulted. The players would not keep their places, but preferred getting in a jumbled mass, in which they pushed and kicked one another indiscriminately. This 'scrum' like mass never approached the goalposts, but generally wandered off the confines of the field, where abounded a plentiful growth of prickly cacti [...] the game generally ended with the ball being punctured by a thorn. (Perry 1921, 108-109)

The Indian body and its response to football is thus used as a metaphor for creating a sense of the uncontrolled nature of the unschooled Indian physique — having within it the flaws of being impulsive and lacking self-control. This is used to justify the discipline imposed by a 'higher' race — the British colonizer. Football thus was an idiom through which different types of Indian bodies were constructed and in which the evidence of the flawed nature of Indian bodies were manufactured. The ideological project of the British of legitimizing their rule revolved a great deal around the construction of the above-mentioned ideas — ideas through which they not only claimed physical superiority over the Indians but also claimed to have the keys to improving these 'problematic' physiques. These were crucial to the theoretical justifications of British colonial rule.

However, football was much more than just an idiom — it was one of the techniques that were used as a technology of corporal transformation and control. It was intended to ‘correct’ the supposedly feeble body of the *babu* in schools and colleges. On the other hand, football was used to maintain vigour of the martial race soldiers and discipline their ‘impulsive’ bodies in the Army. This is exemplified in the speech of Lord Roberts while presenting the Durand Cup in 1892: “the same qualities, discipline and combination, were equally necessary in good soldiers and footballers.” (Bale and Cronin 2003, 119) Thus, football was implicated in the colonial strategies — both as a discourse and as technology for power.

The Indian Response and the Footballer’s Body as a Site for Discursive Resistance

But it is fundamental to look at the question of how Indians responded to all this representation of their bodies for a proper consideration of football in India. One example will demonstrate the complexities of approaching this issue in the case of football. In 1911 the Bengali football club, Mohun Bagan, saw off St. Xavier’s, the Rifle Brigade, and the 1st Middlesex Regiment, on their way to the IFA Shield final in Calcutta. The club was recognized as having a serious chance of winning the most important football tournament in colonial India. The final had brought a crowd estimated at between 60000 and 100000 that travelled from far and across. They trav-

elled by specially arranged trains, streamers and trams to see the game. A temporary telephone had been installed at the nearby Calcutta Football Club to transmit reports across Bengal. Mookerjee sums up the feelings of the day thus: "Soccer fever had engulfed Calcutta. The IFA Shield final pushed everything else to the background. Hope, once kindled, whatever the odds against be, refuses to be snuffed". (Mookerjee 1989, 150) In an exciting match, the Indians came from a goal down to score twice in the last five minutes: "wild excitement burst out among the Indian spectators...When the referee blew the long whistles, shirts, hats, handkerchieves, sticks and umbrellas started flying in the air". (Mookerjee 1989, 151)

This was a victory that unified Bengalis of different religions against their colonial rulers. It also happened to be the moment when the axioms of colonial discourses on the body were dramatically reversed, a point that Indian newspapers were quick to explain. The fact that Bengalis resented representation as physically inferior and saw football as a means of challenging such a construction is evident in the ironic reconstruction of these discourses in the media. The Bengali newspaper *Nayak* encapsulates the message in the following manner (July 30, 1911):

Indians can hold their own against Englishmen in every walk of art and science, in every learned profession, and in the higher grades of the public ser-

vice...It only remained for Indians to beat Englishmen in their peculiarly English sport, the football. It fills every Indian with joy to learn of the victory of the Mohun Bagan team over English soldiers in the Challenge Shield competition. It fills every Indian with joy and pride to know that rice-eating, malaria-ridden, barefooted Bengalis have got the better of beef-eating, Herculean, booted John Bull in the peculiarly English sport. Never before was there witnessed such universal demonstration of joy, men and women alike sharing it and demonstrating it by showering of flowers, embraces, shouts, whoops, screams and even dances. (Bale and Cronin 2003, 120)

Such a quotation becomes all the more telling when placed against an article from the same newspaper that was published just before the Mohun Bagan match:

We English-educated *Babus* are like dolls dancing on the palms of Englishmen. The education which makes *Babus* of us, and gives us our food whether we are in service or in some profession, is established by the English. Our... political efforts and aspirations are all kinds of gifts of the English people... English education and the superficial imitation of English habits and manners have made us perfectly worthless, a miserable mixture of Anglicanism and *swadeshim*. (Bale and Cronin 2003, 120)

Thus it is evident that the body was central to Indian conceptions of their subjugation and their frustration at

that. The dramatic reversal of this discourse is revealed in the doll metaphor. So it does not come as a surprise to see that the football victory of Mohun Bagan was celebrated in a triumphant corporal idiom that satirizes the reversed axiom.

The Nuances of such a 'Triumph'

However, the complexity of choosing the Indian footballer's body as a site for discursive resistance is not so straightforward. The 1911 victory was a moment of nationalist triumph when one of the ideological mainstays of colonialism — that of the belief in the innate British superiority and in Indian physical frailty, was dramatically and publicly undone. And yet there was an acceptance of the British moral system (introduced through Anglo-Indian schools, colleges and the Army, in which only success in sport and the demonstration of physical prowess could signal strength and self-reliance), in celebrating the undoing of these stereotypes. The celebration of the victory was a corporal metaphor which contained an acceptance of the colonial culture that dictated that the body was the correct site for judging a people and its destiny. The football final and the Indian victory was at one and the same time both a victory for the bodies of the Bengali team and the people that they represented. But at the same time it is also an acceptance and legitimation of the discourses of strength and self-discipline that underlay the body politics introduced by the British Raj.

This is nowhere more evident than in the following excerpt:

We question ourselves, why with such glorious tradition, with such heritage, and with such immense resources of talented footballers, we are lagging behind those elites of soccer, who did not even exist when we lived and thrived on the game of soccer. It is because of defective management, or socio-economic conditions coupled with genetic imperfection of Indian footballers concerning physical fitness, or because of the indifferent attitude of the government that we are yet lagging behind a good number of the soccer playing countries, even in Asia¹. (Bale and Cronin, 2003, 121)

The British trick of conceptualizing/framing football failure in terms of essentialized Indian bodies is something that still seems to have remained. For Indians to still be thinking in these terms almost fifty years after Independence is a testament to the inextricably intertwined nature of body, football and the politics of colonialism in post-colonial India.

Conclusion

The paper has tried to demonstrate that corporal politics are central to any attempt at understanding sport in South Asia, and India in particular, and conversely

that sport has been significant in the corporal politics of the region. As far as football is concerned, it was demonstrated that the game provided the British an idiom for the discursive construction of the inferiority of the Indian body and the superiority of the European body — a strategy crucial in legitimizing colonial rule. The British could manipulate a set of images provided by football to construe certain Indians as inherently weak and those Indians deemed to be strong as corporally indisciplined. These representations were then conveniently pitted against the model of the British colonizer which was already constructed/upheld as both strong and disciplined. Thus football provided a reason for active British intervention in India, through which the colonizer could ‘improve’ the colonized. So, sport in general and football in particular acted as idioms for discursive construction and technologies for disciplinary power.

The paper also highlighted how football became central in the local resistance to colonial discourses. The victory of the ‘rice-eating Bengali’ over the ‘beef-eating John Bull’ in 1911 was the epitome of such a resistance/intervention. The paper concludes by pointing out the complexities of choosing the footballer’s body as a site for discursive challenges by an extract which shows the prevalent mindset of thinking of failure in football in terms of essentialized Indian bodies even fifty years after Independence.

Note:

1. The excerpt is to be originally found in a 1993 document of the Indian Football Association entitled “Role, Achievements of the Indian Football Association (W.B) in the Promotion and Development of the game of Football in India.”

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